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ABSTRACT

This project began when the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP) initiated a residency partnership with the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in traditional Cambodian arts. The PFP anticipated raising issues that might help in the understanding of the cultural dynamics and elements that were likely to shape and effect the residency. The PFP imagined that such work might involve an exploration of the meanings and processes of traditional Khmer arts, and an attempt was made to understand what went on in a classroom devoted to Khmer youth making Khmer art under the guidance of Khmer teachers. This document is intended as a contribution to a more public discussion of some of the educational issues related to the residency. This paper addresses questions of multiculturalism and folk arts in education, outlines some of the educational issues raised by the residency, and details some of the successes and failures of the project. The paper's appendices include background on the participating artists, questions for educators, and a resource list. (DQE)

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Philadelphia Folklore Project WORKING PAPERS #8

"He Says You're Going to Play the Giant": Ethnographic Perspectives on a Cambodian Arts Class in Philadelphia

By William Westerman

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**"He Says You're Going to Play the Giant":**

**Ethnographic Perspectives on a Cambodian Arts Class in Philadelphia**

by William Westerman


i. Prologue ..... 2

ii. Recruitment ..... 5

iii. Logistics and impediments to attendance ..... 7

iv. Curriculum—the official structure ..... 14

v. The *Lakhon bassak* explosion ..... 15

vi. Theatrical issues ..... 16

vii. Evaluation ..... 19

viii. Questions of form ..... 24

ix. What is teaching, what counts as teaching... ..... 24

x. ...and what counts as creativity (or, how folk artists get caught in a double-bind) ..... 26

xi. Invisible barriers and unanswered questions ..... 29

xii. The integration question ..... 31

xiii. Is this the beginning of *lakhon bassak* in Philadelphia? ..... 32

xiv. Conclusions: What this is, what this is not ..... 33

Acknowledgments ..... 36

Appendices ..... 37

Background on artists ..... 37

Questions for educators ..... 37

Other PFP materials related to Khmer arts and education ..... 37

"He Says You're Going to Play the Giant":
Ethnographic Perspectives on a Cambodian Arts Class in Philadelphia

## i. Prologue

**Background:** During the academic year 1992-93, the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial (FAM) hosted a residency in traditional Cambodian arts with funding by the Pew Arts Education Development Project and assistance from the Philadelphia Folklore Project (PFP). The PFP had been working with Cambodian traditional artists for over two years, and had at that time already been a tenant at the Fleisher for more than six years, and thus entered into this partnership with some knowledge of all parties. The PFP took responsibility for ethnographic documentation and for helping to facilitate the planned partnership. In particular, PFP anticipated raising issues that might help in the understanding of the cultural dynamics and elements that were likely to shape and effect the residency. The PFP imagined that such work might involve us an exploration of the meanings and processes of traditional Khmer arts, and an attempt to understand what went on in a classroom devoted to Khmer youth making Khmer art under the guidance of Khmer teachers. This document, which emerges from, draws from, and expands upon earlier preliminary reports, is intended as a contribution to a more public discussion of some of the educational issues related to the residency. This paper addresses questions of multiculturalism and folk arts in education in the hopes of complicating the issue, by asking how to remain true to the depth and complexity of all artistic traditions. The residency challenged many of the assumptions we hold in this country about teaching art. This paper outlines some of the educational issues raised by the residency, and details, if only anecdotally, some of the successes and failures of the project.

**Overview of the residency:** Leendavy Koung (Khmer[1] artist and PFP staff member) with the collaboration of her father, Koung Peang, led weekly two-hour Tuesday afternoon art classes, and four special Saturday workshops, from September to May, in a basement classroom at the Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial in South Philadelphia. Occasional small group instruction within the class was led by younger instructors, and other artists (notably Sipom Ming, Leendavy Koung's mother and Koung Peang's wife). The classes provided up to fifty students, most of them Khmer, with many opportunities completely new in their educational experiences in the U.S. In this process we encountered numerous obstacles, some of which could be anticipated, given our former work in the community, but some new. The class

[1]The terms "Khmer" and "Cambodian" are those used by members of the community themselves. We recognize there are differences between these terms and "Khmer American," "Cambodian American," and "Asian American." Our usage of the terms "Khmer" and "Cambodian" reflects community usage of such terms, as well as distinctions made between themselves and non-Khmers, who are in English usually referred to simply as "Americans." At least until such time as youth born in the U.S. of Cambodian parents or those who came here at a very young age mature and develop different preferences for naming the distinctions between themselves and non-Khmer Americans, these terms will have to suffice. (Members of some other ethnic groups whom people might have encountered in Asia, notably Laotians, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Thais, are also often omitted from this Khmer/American dichotomy).

also led, perhaps inadvertently, to the first opportunity to produce a relatively large-scale Cambodian folk opera in the area since Cambodian refugees arrived in this country in the 1980s.

The weekly class began with drawing, which remained the central feature throughout the year. Koung Peang drew certain characters from the operatic repertoire on the blackboard and the students copied. Cambodian operas can include humorous, tragic, romantic, or military themes, in any combination, and instruction covered all these. The primary characters or stock character types introduced included princes, princesses, the giants Ahsorin (male), Yek Kney (female), the 10-faced giant Tossomokareag, a white horse, monkeys including the monkey king Hanuman, and *apsara* angels. In later months there were also drawings of scenery (*kbach pñi)* and statue ornamentation (*chumla*). Students also experimented with chalk and paint, before moving on to maskmaking. Several of the same characters from the drawings were developed into masks: the white horse, Hanuman, Tossomokareag, Yek Kney, and a clown. There was some instruction in costume design and beadwork; students learned differences in men's and women's costume and mastered elementary geometric and representational beadwork design. Much of this work was completed by students at their homes. There was also some face painting associated with the Saturday workshops that developed at the Fleisher. In addition, stage movement and stickfighting components were part of the class for the older students. Voice and music instruction took place largely off-site. Further details are developed throughout this paper, but this provides an initial overview.

**Overall issues:** While this program was, in fact, highly successful, the problems encountered along the way raise many questions about techniques and issues in multicultural educational situations—issues that too often are glossed over, if noticed at all. In the interest of addressing such problems in the future, I would like to spotlight the problems, barriers, and pitfalls here, to address issues that remained unsolved, and to offer some discussion of these topics that reframes some of the questions a program like this should ask.

While I begin here with discussion of obstacles, barriers, and pitfalls, I should point out at the outset that I am concerned equally with differing cultural expectations, and with examining our own paradigms and expectations for what an art class (or any class) in U.S. culture "should" be. Framing a discussion only as a question of "obstacles" to be overcome places the burden for adaptation too easily on the Cambodian American artists and students involved in the project, rather than looking at ways in which U.S. society, let alone Western American culture, needs to be more responsive to *all* students. I start with the assumption here that **not all students share in the educational culture of this place and time, and not all students want to. And in an art class especially—and larger program—there should be room for that.**

**Defining a role.** This essay is written by an ethnographer, not by one who participated either as teacher or as student, and it is written by a highly partisan ethnographer with a commitment to Khmer participation in the artistic life of this geographical region. This essay is not written as a blueprint for this

kind of class, but merely notes some of the challenges to mainstream standard assumptions about culture and the teaching of art in our society. That is, in this first year of a projected three-year cycle of folk/vernacular art classes in a "free" art school[2], we ask not only what did we learn about the teaching and learning of traditional Cambodian (ethnic Khmer) arts through this process, but what did we learn about our own, American and Western expectations about the teaching and learning of traditional art? What did we learn about Cambodian culture, but also what did we learn about American culture in the process?

As an ethnographer, I had the responsibility of being a professional observer, but one who would not turn the students and teachers into mere objects. This meant constantly re-examining what I had learned throughout my life as the norm, redefining the center, and making my own education and experience as much an object, while at the same time recognizing the students as the subjects in their own education. What barriers there are to intercultural education and experience are barriers around each of the groups to which we may belong. It is easy to yield to the temptation to present over and over the Cambodian horse-and-monkey show, to focus on the "exotic" in Khmer arts and present them superficially as a way of diversifying the classroom. But we must recognize that what goes on *around* that show may be education of a form and method with which non-Khmers are unfamiliar.

It is not our hope that all art teaching should assimilate into one model that is ideal for all situations; rather, we hope to acknowledge and support diversity in the deepest senses of the term, recognizing that just as different students learn differently, and different teachers excel in different ways, there are different cultural patterns for teaching arts, neither mutually exclusive nor inherently unequal in quality. There ought to be room for multiple ways of teaching and learning about all the arts both in society and in the space of one school, indeed one classroom.

There is a developing field incorporating folk arts in education, which has the potential to dovetail nicely with a growing interest in multicultural education. Both the Philadelphia Folklore Project and the Fleisher Art Memorial approached this as an in-depth experiment in folk arts in education, but starting from a slightly different vantage point than do many of such efforts. Rather than bring in outside artists to present folk arts to students from a variety of backgrounds usually foreign to the artist, **we decided to work from the center, bringing artists from the neighborhood to teach to students of their own culture, who were not being served in their own school system.** Thus it was less an attempt to introduce students to the diversity of others' traditions, but to encourage them to study and understand their own. Plus, it was and continues to be an attempt to do this with depth, and not as a one-time-only demonstration or short residency. We hoped to build in three components to this class:

- a structure of long-term, intensive relationships,
- autonomy for the artists involved, and

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[2]The Samuel S. Fleisher Art Memorial, founded in 1898, is the oldest free-tuition public art school in the country, offering a curriculum of fine arts instruction to adults and children.

• a recognition of local (i.e. native, homegrown, organic) talent, of both teachers and students.

Despite many logistical pitfalls we encountered and ways in which some goals were frustrated, in those three above areas we met with considerable success.

In the spirit of other work at the Philadelphia Folklore Project, we come to this situation aware of our status as outside observers, respectful of the boundaries and priorities established by the participants in the class. Unlike perhaps all-too-often overzealous journalists, we have learned to be satisfied with the pace of our enlightenment set by those with the knowledge. An equitable relationship demands that we learn to live with the tension between desiring to know more about the traditions and the transmission of knowledge, and respecting the space and privacy of those who generously let us into their classroom.

One strength of the process—and one could say the wisdom of multiyear grants and programs—is that it allows trusting relationships to develop and allows both the participants and the observers to mull slowly over issues of educational and personal significance. What we have learned has come from a process of watching and then asking a little, then watching some more, and asking again, perhaps more deeply or in a different way, allowing the relationships to develop, allowing ourselves to be corrected and trying to make that process as accessible as possible, so that after a while formal asking and answering become less necessary.

But at the same time, while I had hoped to include the voices of the participants themselves in this first year report, and while I remain committed to this, there are a variety of reasons why that did not develop, which I will discuss below. There is meaning in that silence.

For the reasons outlined above, there can be no definitive or conclusive overview, but at best a series of observations and considerations of some issues, processes, and areas of significance.

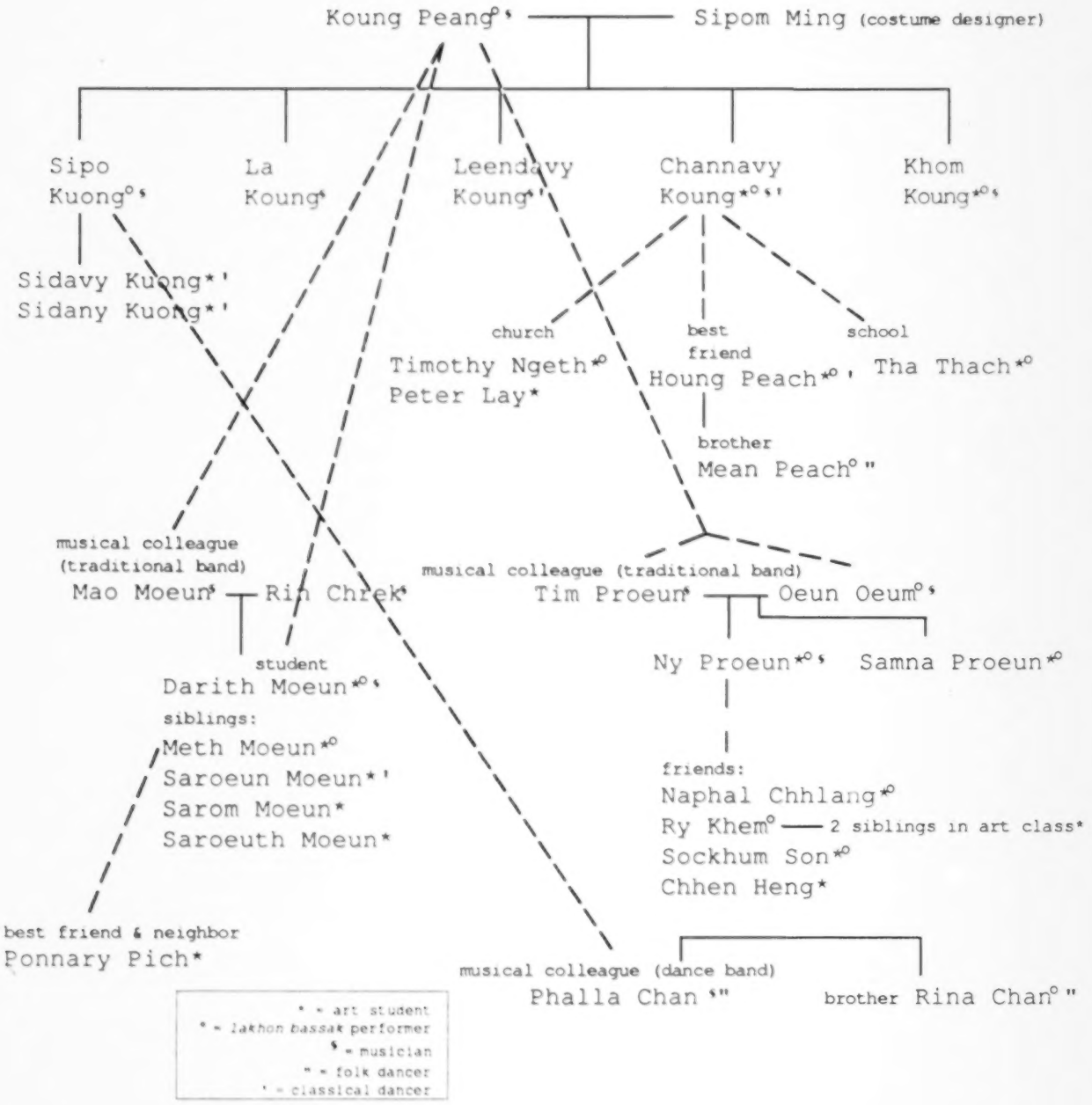
**ii. Recruitment**

Finding students for the class was not a problem, but getting students to come each week presented a series of problems. Access to many so-called mainstream educational and cultural programs is frequently a major issue. What happened in this class, which featured both mainstream, traditional, and alternative dimensions, can be instructive in understanding where apparently thoughtful, considerate plans may miss their mark in such educational initiatives.

Recruitment took place through word of mouth, and through a series of bilingual flyers distributed in Cambodian neighborhoods of South and West Philadelphia and in the Olney-Logan sections of North Philadelphia. Word of mouth recruitment took place largely through family and social contacts of the

Figure 1

Relations of Teachers and Students in the Koung Family Arts Residency
showing relationships between participants and
other artistic traditions known

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Koung family, either through Koung Peang himself, or church and school acquaintances of his daughters, Leendavy (the class coordinator) and Channavy.[3]

The significance of this whole recruitment process is that it raises questions about educational access, and the ways that may be culturally determined. Specifically, **there were few students in the class 1) who did not already know Mr. Koung at the beginning, 2) who came in unconnected to the local network of musical families or 3) who had no arts experience beforehand.** This was less true of the younger students, some of whom did come on the strength of the flyer, but those who remained most committed to the class were in some way connected directly with one of the central families. The flyers, particularly those distributed to North and West Philadelphia, and to some extent South Philadelphia west of Broad, attracted few students as far as we know. Yet the specific reasons for this are unclear. Possible contributing explanations include:

1) the logistical difficulties involved,

2) the fact that the written word is still not so useful a means of communication in Cambodian American society as word of mouth, so notices and "invitations" communicated in this way are simply less effective,

3) patterns of community and family relationships which (whether replicating here those ties in village or urban life in Cambodia or not), may result in people's feeling more comfortable associating with those with whom they already have ties,

4) if for some reason the idea of coming to school at what we would call a "neutral" location, but which they might see as unknown and unfamiliar territory, is still too risky.

Other members of the class initially came via other kinds of personal contacts but did not remain or become consistent participants. There was a cadre of students younger than age 10 who came the first few weeks of the class and then their attendance trailed off. These primarily came as a result of a

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[3]Those recruited in this way almost invariably came from the 6th & 7th Street areas of South Philadelphia (that is, east of Broad Street), while only four students came, and they for a short time only, from South Philadelphia west of Broad Street.

Some of the students involved were family members of Koung Peang, including his youngest daughter (Channavy) and son (Khom) and two granddaughters (Sidany and Sidavy). Another core group of students came from two nearby families of musicians. The Moeun family, who knew the Koung family since their life in the Thai refugee camps, has five children, all involved in the class (Darith Moeun, Meth Moeun, Saroeun Moeun, then later Sarom Moeun and Saroeuth Moeun); their mother is a singer and their father a musician. The Proeun family had two children in the class (Ny Proeun and Samna Proeun); their father is a musician and their mother a singer and opera performer.

Channavy Koung also recruited her friends, who entered into the project in varying degress of enthusiasm and trepidation. These included her best friend (Houng Peach), two friends from church (Timothy Ngeth and Peter Lay), and one friend from her school who joined the group later (Tha Thach). All these students lived in the vicinity of South 6th and 7th Streets, as well. All the above students became the core group of the project. At the beginning there were more ... s in the younger category (up to age 10), many of whom stopped coming later on. Later, two other small groups of students, one group of little girls less than age 10, and one group of teenage boys, also joined the class, but they got involved through a classical dance group and the folk opera respectively, both of which I will come back to later on.

Readers may want to refer to the included chart, which diagrams family, friend, and acquaintance relationships of the teachers and students, as well as the artistic traditions with which each person was familiar (fig. 1). Further information about some artists and participants is included as Appendix A.

series of phone calls Koung Peang made to his friends, those students' parents and grandparents. Some, according to Leendavy Koung, must have seen the flyer too, although she was not sure specifically who came from which source.

The appearance of the group outside the class in the Philadelphia Mummers' Parade (which I will address specifically below) was cause for additional recruitment. As the parade performance drew nearer, the group picked up a number of other students, some of whom concentrated only on theatre arts, while others became fully integrated in the visual arts component at the Fleisher.[4]

At one point in the spring, three teenaged boys from South Philadelphia west of Broad Street came to the class, though how they heard about it we did not determine. Unfortunately, two of the three proved very disruptive in the one class they did attend, and Leendavy Koung asked them not to return, apparently a mutual feeling. Though we considered whether this was the best policy or if in fact they had wanted to return on a probationary basis, or perhaps the least disruptive of the three could return alone, the matter was not taken up further.

In the end, 24 students were recognized at the Fleisher's closing Saturday ceremony for their participation in the program. This group does not include the number of younger students who stopped attending after the first few weeks, nor those students who became drawn into the program either via the Mummers' Parade, or performances in April and May, around the time of the Cambodian New Year. It can be estimated that another 20-25 students were involved in one of these ways. **Given how many students were recruited in such a short time and from such a small geographical area, it would be astonishing to think how many Cambodian American youth elsewhere in Philadelphia (let alone students of other cultural backgrounds) are not being served by arts or art education programs.**

### iii. Logistics and impediments to attendance

Though it may sound trivial, of these logistical issues, one of the biggest problems turned out to be transportation, not only an issue in and of itself, but the root cause of an entire array of other, related problems. That is, the issue was not only one of recruitment, but also of retention, attendance, and participation.

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[4]One such person in the former category was Houng Peach's older brother, Mean Peach, aged 28, who had extensive experience in the folk dance group and who had learned different theatrical forms in the camps. He joined the performance class and took to it right away. But, out of school and working to support his children, he was unable to attend the weekly art classes. On the other hand, four friends who began to come to the art class together during Christmas break (Naphal Chhlang, Sockhum Son, Chhen Heng, and Ry Khem, who had all heard about the class through Ny Proeun), also became involved in the opera performance. The first three continued to attend the Tuesday art class, if sporadically, for the remainder of the year. The fourth, Ry Khem, also worked as a contract laborer; if he wasn't working on a Tuesday, he would show up at class, but he became one of the leads in the opera and excelled in voice and movement. Only the former two were active in both the art class and the opera and despite no prior experience, each found his niche. This core group of students, then, including both the Tuesday art class and the opera, ranged in age from 5 to 28. But, of all the students in their teens, only two were female, Channavy Koung and Houng Peach.

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Running an afterschool program near (but not actually in) a Cambodian neighborhood, we had to figure out a way to shuttle the students to the class. When the weather was nice, students, particularly the older ones, would walk to and from class, sometimes taking the little ones in tow. But the reality was also that, to get home from the Fleisher, students would have to walk through white, Vietnamese, and African American neighborhoods usually in the dark and, when pressed, some students would admit to feeling a little uneasy about this. So foot transportation was not completely adequate.

Because of the large number of younger students at the beginning, the participation of at least one student from west of Broad Street, and the coming cold weather, being able to provide some form of transportation was really necessary. Many of the kids had working parents who were out of the house when they got home from school, and it was unrealistic to ask parents to deliver their children. At first, we all pitched in (me, Leendavy, and Koung Peang). There were immediately problems having me as driver; for one, if adults at home didn't know me, they were reluctant for me, a white outsider in the community, to take away their children. Also, as kids were often subject to the schedules of their families, they had to cancel from time to time with no clear way of letting us know. So it was unproductive, at best, for me to drive around South Philadelphia and not find the children whom I was supposed to pick up. We tried to get a van, but that also proved unsuccessful. In the end, both Leendavy and her father would come with a carload of students, and other, older students might show up via public transportation. (One older student did drive, too.)

Thus, though the kids were relatively compact and many would fit into a car, it just became impossible to maintain a class of 25-28 students and make two or three trips to provide them all with rides each week, particularly if they came from different parts of the city.

In a way, then, many issues became dependent on the issue of transportation and communities. If one of the key staff, namely Leendavy or her father, were sick on a given class day, that would also cut into the student attendance. And because our transportation resources were so limited, that really circumscribed the geographical range of where students could come from. Without better solving the transportation issues, it would have been impossible to accommodate students from other neighborhoods.

What also became an issue out of this was how students who couldn't attend in a given week would notify the drivers not to pick them up. Often they wouldn't. Again, I don't know to what extent this is a cultural issue, but frequently students would just not show up (or not be home for the driver to pick up) without giving prior warning or reason. Once I got to know some of the older students better, it turns out that they would tell me the reasons in advance of why they wouldn't attend, rather than tell Leendavy. (In some ways, I had become a safe go-between.) In contrast, interaction with the younger students was entirely with Mr. Koung and Leendavy, in Khmer, and not translated.

For various reasons, attendance declined after an early peak. At the height of the class, 28 students came, crowded into the little studio in the Fleisher basement. The older students, committed to rehearsing the opera, later skipped the Tuesday art class with some frequency. A couple of students had

to leave because of job commitments which conflicted (a fact which may have prevented other students from coming in the first place). Why some of the younger students stopped attending is unclear. Partly it was because the transportation issues became too cumbersome (for example, picking up the lone student from west of Broad Street was just not time-effective). Partly it was because, as the group became more focused and cohesive as a performing unit, there was less time and energy available from the instructors to direct towards so many novice students who were less mature and more in need of discipline and close supervision.

No doubt these younger students had their own reasons (some in fact did tell Leendavy they preferred to stay home and watch TV), but getting them to assert that was usually not possible, for several likely reasons:

1) rules of politeness in Khmer culture which discourage
   - speaking up to elders, which is seen as disrespectful
   - open criticism and negative evaluation, likewise disrespectful, and
   - outspokenness, in contrast to judicious silence;
2) rules of propriety regarding speaking to outsiders, because
   - they may not be fully trustworthy,
   - such talk may be seen as impolite, and
   - negative comments could have serious consequences.

Since Fran Gallun (an artist and Fleisher art teacher who participated as contact and observer in this project) and I were both elders and white English-speaking Americans, we were in the beginning in more problematic positions for the above reasons, until the students got to know us better. The older students came to realize there was a certain "safety" in our marginalized or liminal position, somewhat analogous to, in our culture, the difference in discipline and authority issues between one's parents and one's benevolent grandparent, aunt or uncle. But to the students under the age of 10 I think we remained more "outsiders" and more "elders."[5]

So the attrition rate was high, but likewise, the "late registration" rate was high too, and the students who started coming in late fall and winter, when the performance aspects of these arts were developing, these were generally more dedicated and serious about their participation from the outset, because they joined to take part in a known outcome which interested them. They were also for the most part older, ages 13 and up.

Family, school, and work took top priority, however. **In a culture where family obligations and economic responsibilities are so important, it was not always easy, or desirable, for students to come to class and rehearsal all the time.** The current economic situation of the families necessitate

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[5]Older students were also astute enough to realize that we were facilitators of the class, not teachers and decidedly not those Americans—the directors of both institutions as well as the funders—actually in charge. An important distinction.

that their children work, and students of course have school responsibilities as well. As I mentioned before, some students left permanently when the class conflicted with a new job. Others would miss the class from time to time when they needed to earn extra money, or if school demands or athletics presented a conflict. This especially became an issue with the Saturday morning workshops, which conflicted not only with jobs, but with Saturday morning Khmer and Chinese language classes, and Saturday afternoon classical and folk dance classes. Pressures at home were often unspoken, or were revealed to me only after I had known students for a long time (and for some reason, I would hear things that Leendavy and her father had not—at least three times that I can think of offhand).[6]

**Another recruitment problem was the participation of female students above the age of 12.** There were only two such students in the class, Koung Peang's youngest daughter and her best friend. This is not a problem isolated to this class, either, as other youth workshops and programs designed for Cambodian students have run into the same issue. A result of the differential treatment afforded to males and females in Cambodian society is that young women are often kept very sheltered by their parents and are not encouraged to participate in outside educational or cultural activities the way that boys are. Channavy Koung speculated that the number of young men involved in the opera, would have contributed to the caution of parents of young women. Under trusted adult supervision, or under certain safe circumstances, or with particularly independent young women, this could be known to change. In fact, the Koung family was one of only two recognized performing musical families in Cambodia where the daughters were trained to play all the musical instruments in the ensemble; usually only the vocal parts and small percussion instruments were acceptable. Leendavy Koung's position as traditional musician, and as teacher, is all the more remarkable in this context. But, there were still barriers to overcome in this regard even in Philadelphia. With the development of all-female classical dance troupes for girls of a young age here in Philadelphia, perhaps more female student will be encouraged in the future to pursue interests in the arts as they get older. But in any case, this remains an issue that deserves attention by people recruiting students for an art class, or any such program.

This is further compounded by the fact that the questionable or marginal social status of young people associated with the theatrical arts in Cambodia further stigmatizes the participants even here, on some level. Actually, this is true not only of theatrical arts, but many other art forms to a greater or lesser extent. Some of this came out of the economic and social position of theatrical performers in Cambodia, who were regarded as marginal, both economically (lower-class, in a very socially stratified and class-conscious society), and sexually (promiscuous, in a society where sexual interaction, at least publicly, is very carefully circumscribed by rules of propriety regarding engagement, marriage, and male-female interaction in general). In the past, according to Channavy Koung, if you were a dancer, people would

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[6]This included, for example, one student who missed some rehearsals during the last weeks of the class because his father was hospitalized, and I found this out almost by accident (only because Leendavy had told me to call people and remind them to come to the remaining rehearsals).

think "you're cheap— no, meaning... like hookers (not exactly)." So, one impediment to the greater participation of students, or more relaxed participation of those already in the class, was **the stigma associated with the performing arts.**

As a result, the reactions of parents to the rehearsals and performances were mixed. These reactions often depended in large part on the parents' social background in Cambodia, including their area of origin and especially their social class. Coupled with the economic and class circumstances in life in the U.S., more than a few parents expressed a desire for their children to go into more approved activities, such as school, employment, and, among the arts, classical dance. One student—a high school honor roll student, in fact, who has only been here three years—confessed that his parents constantly pressured him to quit the class, because they were worried he was involved in gang activity (or that this could lead to a series of anti-social behaviors, beginning with decline in schoolwork, and so on). For upper- and middle-class families, and especially those who saw themselves as upwardly mobile, either in Cambodia or the U.S., practicing *lakhon bassak* was seen as a step downward.

When the actual opera performances took place at the culmination of the Fleisher school year, few parents attended (other than those in performing families who were actually involved in the production). I repeatedly asked the older students whether they had invited their parents. I got a mixed response: some had, some hadn't, some knew their parents wouldn't come, and perhaps some didn't want their parents to come. It proved to be a sensitive issue, one which never really got me comfortable answers, even when the students I knew best were being fairly open with me. In contrast, questionnaires distributed among the younger students indicated they thought their parents were happy they were in the art class—or perhaps the younger students felt that was the most appropriate answer for the questionnaire, and they thought we wanted to hear that their parents were happy to have children in the art class. But I had no sense of that among the teenaged students.

The Saturday workshops successfully brought out the core group of teenaged students, who were present largely in teaching capacities, demonstrating the arts in which they had become proficient to local white, African American, Latino, and non-Khmer Asian American students who already attended Saturday classes at the Fleisher. The students demonstrated many of the art forms practiced in the Tuesday afternoon classes. As a result, three or four "American" kids, as they became known, attended one or more Tuesday art classes, and two of the teachers, Fran Gallun being one, incorporated Khmer arts in their regular Saturday classes.

**Other questions:** This raises issues regarding crossover (one of the project's stated larger aims—and also intended as an additional means of recruiting students): given the impediments to recruitment and retention of Cambodian American students for this class, how could an art school like Fleisher attract and retain Cambodian American students in its "regular" classes? Given issues we have already raised regarding impediments, do classes themselves present additional impediments to involvement? (Are Fleisher's "regular" classes inherently Western?) Are Khmer arts accessible to non-

Cambodian students? And, in what role are Khmer youth cast when asked to present or teach in such settings? Can it empower, or does it merely create new barriers, forcing individuals into positions which make them uncomfortable?[7]

**One thing demonstrated by the successes and failures of recruitment for this class is the importance of word of mouth and personal recruitment.** English-language-only documents, whether handmade flyers or professionally printed brochures, have only limited circulation and understanding, particularly among elders. (Again, middle-class elders would have more access to understanding such materials.) In large families it is unclear who gets the mail and what the lines of communication are, nor do we know who goes to neighborhood stores and who stops to read the materials on the door. In every activity in which we have been involved, word of mouth seems always to do better, but can often successfully be followed up by bilingual information which confirms logistical details. The advantage of writing, of course, is that it can confirm important details that may even be suspect (seeing the word "Free" in print, for example, is one such helpful confirmation). **Word of mouth, which to American ways may not seem to be as efficient, incorporates values and degrees of trust, companionship, and accessibility, overcoming many of those barriers by the pre-selection of who tells what to whom.**

But polished brochures may be filtered out by all but the most independent and assertive young people, as being part of an unfriendly, inaccessible, and worse, unwelcoming and hostile bureaucracy. By the time students—some students—have made it to college, they have learned to make use of forms and materials like financial aid information, and have learned how to make that kind of information work for them. Until then, I wonder how much is seen as accessible to younger Cambodians. Impressive brochures, if Cambodian families even see the brochures in the first place, can imply costliness. But some of their impact is psychological too; English-language, American-dominated programs can be alienating, even stigmatizing or hostile at worst, irrelevant at best. And given the cultural (in)sensitivity of most arts programming (of all kinds) in this country, let alone other social services, that's not at all an unreasonable assumption, not at all inaccurate.

Are Khmer arts accessible to non-Cambodian students, or for that matter to Khmer students? Perhaps the question depends equally on the accessibility of the artists, as on the arts. But certain logistical issues proved to be of overriding concern. Impediments to the participation of American students included :

1) language barriers between the older Mr. Koung and the children, and

2) many of the same barriers to participation of Cambodian students, compounded by language differences and differences in social realities, such as means of telephone communication. For example,

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[7]These were issues PFP staff and Philadelphia public school teachers explored, with special reference to Khmer folklife, in our annual workshop for educators, Representing Folk Culture, in the spring of 1993. See Appendix B for excerpts of some of the materials used.

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if Mr. Koung decided to cancel class or hold it elsewhere, he could easily start a "phone chain" going by calling several of his Cambodian students. American students would require phone calls in English (if their numbers were available), and probably individual phone calls to each student.

3) Even something as seemingly "minor" as different holidays could be an impediment, as each group would have different expectations about when class would or would not be held. The American students were unprepared for the cancellation of class for the Cambodian New Year, a holiday with which they were unfamiliar. And I fell short on anticipating who would need to be called when, or what special arrangements would be made for class.

4) The accessibility of the teacher is not just an issue in cross-cultural interaction, but may be an issue within the culture as well. **Accessibility itself is seen as a virtue in our educational culture (presuming some degree of egalitarian status of teacher and student), but, like many of the themes that run through our educational expectations, the idea of accessibility is culturally determined. What we see as accessibility, after all, may represent a breakdown of a more traditional, respectful role of the teacher elsewhere.**[8]

5) Finally, prejudices each group may have about the other can lead to misunderstanding and different expectations, and disappointments. For example, Koung Peang informed us early on that he was particularly interested in getting American students involved, because he believed them to be more interested in arts and culture than Cambodian youth.

But the question of why American students didn't participate more directly in the class remains to be addressed. Being an outsider—not officially a participating student of Khmer arts (except before the Mummers' parade), but in an ambiguous role as sort-of-student-of-the-culture and sort-of-facilitator, and older (a factor which perhaps added to my patience and, I would hope, cultural sensitivity, but which detracted from my ability to learn a new language)—I can say that I can see how American students would become frustrated if things did not get translated, or were only translated for them after their considerable effort. Now, people may be more patient with young kids, and with students, but a lot of instruction in the class was unspoken or non-verbal, some of which I could understand, but some of which I could not, and I knew that some of that was important. Leendavy and a few of the older students, particularly Tha Thach and Darith Moeun, made an effort now and again, but usually only when asked. In my role, I didn't have much problem with that, respecting and understanding how and why I don't need to know everything. If I were enrolled in a class, however, or if I did not have several very comfortable years' experience as a cultural outsider but instead was coming to a situation like that for the first time, I don't know how I as an American student would have been equipped or willing to handle such a situation.

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[8]A fact that needs to be taken into account by such important educational reformers—with whom I am generally sympathetic—as Paulo Freire.

**iv. Curriculum—the official structure**

Arts covered in the class included drawing, painting, scenic design, costume making and beadwork, maskmaking, movement and stage martial arts, classical dance, stagefighting, face-painting and stage make-up and, with some students, poetry, voice, and music. All the students in the Tuesday class participated in painting and drawing, maskmaking and working with clay. Older students also typically spent the second hour involved in stagefighting and movement. Teaching was primarily by Koung Peang and Leendavy Koung, although the older students would teach younger students when the class broke up into smaller groups to concentrate on different arts.

It was not readily clear to me at the beginning to what extent the curriculum had been worked out on a week to week basis. Of course, much of that was due to the uncertainty surrounding how many students, and of what age, would ultimately participate in the program, and that required great flexibility. Also unclear at the beginning was the end-product of this class; what were the goals that the Koung family had set for themselves and the students? Partly this was circumscribed by the fact that this was originally seen as a one-year class. What can you do in a one-year class? How can you set that up so that it can become institutionalized in future years?

But early interviews with Koung Peang showed that in fact the curriculum had been worked out, at least long term. Initial classes began with drawing figures from the Cambodian narratives on which the theatrical pieces were based, including the *Reamker* (*Ramayana*). These characters included giants, monkeys, and human royalty. Later, students began to work with clay to build the models for the papier-mâché masks, and they used paint to depict the same forms. Still later they began to draw borders and architectural elements for the scenery design. Classes in the fall were divided into two hours, with the second hour for the older students spent on physical activity in another room. (The first few classes had actually included physical exercise for the younger students as well.) Individual instruction for this was often led by Leendavy, her sister Channavy, or by Darith Moeun, a neighbor and protégé of Koung Peang. In one class, a local Cambodian art student at the University of the Arts, Heng May, was brought in to help mold clay into the models on which the masks were made, while another painter and medical student, Sokhom Pin, with his brothers, led a backdrop painting project when scenes from the opera would be videotaped.

The structure of the class itself did change after the new year (Western New Year, that is, 1993), as performance of operatic arts assumed a greater priority, though students did continue drawing, painting, and maskmaking. Students did work on beadwork and costume design as well, particularly the two American girls who came after the three March Saturday workshops, and two male students, Darith Moeun and Rina Chan, who designed and made their own costumes at home in their spare time.

Workshops scheduled on Saturdays in March were intended to make the residency and Khmer arts more visible to the wider Fleisher student and faculty community. The Saturday workshops indicated

that some non-Cambodians could respond to Cambodian arts. But the fuller treatment, of placing them in the context of other art forms, not to mention bringing up their cultural, thematic, or religious significance, could prove well nigh impossible, even for adults and especially for children, and especially without a Khmer language background.

**v. The *Lakhon bassak* explosion**

What happened was perhaps inevitable. In searching for an outlet for the practice of these arts, Koung Peang asked me in an interview in the early fall if the American New Year's parade was open to participation by a Cambodian arts group. At this point a combination of things occurred which changed the focus of the class for good. Attention shifted away from a process-oriented art class with no definitive end-product or outcome, which seemed to have been an issue for Koung Peang if unspoken at the outset, towards preparation for concrete performances, both in Philadelphia's annual world-famous Mummers' Parade on January 1st, and a PFP-sponsored community concert in November 1992. Later performances were to take place at the Cambodian Palelai Buddhist temple, for the celebration of Khmer New Year's in April, and at the Painted Bride Art Center in May.

That November concert included opera performances by Koung Peang, his daughter Channavy and son Sipo, and Sipo's wife Mom Socheata, as well as wedding and other music performed by other notable community musicians, Van Yan, Van Pok, Mao Moeun (the father of five students in the art class, including leader, musician, and performer Darith), and Leendavy Koung. Some 250 people attended, including a number of the students from the Tuesday art class.

As for the Mummers' Parade, the core students involved in the art class, plus this ethnographer, formed the so-called "Cambodian-American Arts Group" for the purpose of marching in the parade. Through Debora Kodish, the PFP Director, Leendavy Koung had already been in touch for some months with one of the fancy division clubs, Golden Sunrise, whose headquarters were just two doors down from the Cambodian Buddhist Temple by a remarkable coincidence and they intended to include a Cambodian contingent for 1993. Koung Peang made use of available materials to bring together a performance for the parade. This included the costumes for *lakhon bassak*, or folk opera, many of which were handmade in the refugee camps in Thailand, masks from *lakhon khol*, or masked dance drama, musical instruments associated with the *chayyam* Cambodian New Year's tradition, and dance movement associated with the latter. The group titled its performance *"suo sdey chnom tmey,"* or happy new year.

This began a process of special rehearsals at the home of Koung Peang to prepare for the group's first performance. All of the older male performers in the group learned *chayyam* drumming or cymbals for the parade, but the drummers, who had to march in costume and do the stage movements, were later replaced in the actual parade by Koung Peang's son, Sipo Kuong, and members of Sipo's

social dance band, called the Red Rose Band: Som Pon, Roth Chhim, Chhong Chhon, and Phalla (Ajay) Chan.[9]

In addition to practicing the movement for the parade, I noticed when I attended rehearsals in the Koung house that people were now beginning to learn the lines and the songs from the opera, to accompany the stickfighting and stage movement they had been learning earlier. They were beginning to act out scenes from a *lakhon bassak* (folk opera) entitled *Tipsongva* which Koung Peang had committed to memory. He would teach the lines by reciting them for the actors to repeat as they went through the stage action; he also accompanied them on a *tror*, a Cambodian two-stringed bowed instrument. It was here that I also first saw people wearing costumes and learning about face-painting and stage make-up. But all this took place at the venue of the Koung family's house, not in the art class itself.

All of the students practicing the *lakhon bassak*, except for one, later came to the art class at least once. At least five new students had joined at the time of the parade, and another two later joined (in 1993) working only on the opera. A couple only did one or the other primarily. But the Mummers' Parade was the event around which the company first jelled, and the possibility of a performance became something of a reality. **That was the defining moment of the class, because it was also the moment at which a critical mass of students became involved enough in the class so as to minimize the importance of all the previous transportation difficulties.** Ultimately, these rehearsals took place seven days a week in preparation for the Mummers' Parade, and unbeknownst to me at the time, continued seven days a week after the parade, all at the same home.

Although sections of *lakhon bassak* had been performed in Philadelphia by the Koung Peang ensemble around 1984-85, the newly named Cambodian-American Arts Group now began to practice a full-length opera for the first time. **And the disparate parts of the arts curriculum that were being taught in the Tuesday class were now being brought together. Students, if only a select few, were not only continuing their art class at Koung Peang's home, but they were bringing their art to their own homes, and making, for example, their own costumes to wear later on the stage.** Even one student who came to the Fleisher class only once learned to make his own costume for the performance, which he wore onstage in the spring.

### vi. Theatrical issues

The theatrical process was interesting to watch. Not being professionally trained in this, I didn't come with an art teacher's expertise at all in comparing this to other art classes—and I relied on Fran

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[9]After the Mummers Parade they had little or nothing to do with the class, but Phalla Chan's younger brother, Rina Chan, who had performed with the folk dance group, joined the Koung Peang class to participate in the opera performance after having seen Koung Peang perform at the PFP community concert in November. This was also the same time that Mean Peach, Naphal Chhlang, Chhen Heng, Ry Khem, and Sockhum Son joined the group for good.

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Gallun's observations—but I can compare Koung Peang to other theatrical directors with whom I worked when I had been the same age his students were. To me—and a lot did in fact get lost in the lack of translation—rehearsals seemed more laid back than I had been accustomed to in the sense that the repetition that I remembered didn't play out here; I also remember directors yelling and demanding more and more all the time. The rehearsals I observed of Koung Peang generally seemed to require less in the way of repetition, although students complained to me how the *day-to-day* repetition got to seem pointless after a while. There also seemed to be less of the authoritarian theatre director than I was used to from my experience, though again, that depended on what I wasn't picking up in translation, on how authority is expressed in Cambodian language and culture, and in front of whom. (In some ways—I later found out—I wasn't privy to the stern authority that was expressed.)

In general Mr. Koung sat off to the side, playing the *tror* while Naphal Chhlang and one other student played the percussion, usually a drum and a cymbal, though at other times they also used a gong and a plastic bucket. (Naphal, a high school junior, had played percussion before when he lived in the refugee camps in Thailand.) Lines were learned by Koung Peang's recitation aloud with the students' repeating them afterward. The only time I ever saw a written text was on a chalkboard in the house before western New Year, for Paisorya's death scene (which one student, Tha Thach, tried to translate for me at the time, the first time—three months into the program—a student had taken up the task of keeping me clued in without my asking first). Mr. Koung referred to no written script, but prompted strictly from memory, when the actors looked at him or indicated verbally (by not speaking, for example) that they didn't know their lines. Another common feature was for one actor who did know a part to speak the line or to sing the part so the actor in that role could hear. And in this way it became a very corporate event, with multiple actors singing the same lines, even the actors offstage (and sometimes even crossing gender, if only jokingly). This even took place during the performance at the Buddhist temple several months later, when an actor such as Darith Moeun stood behind the curtain and sang the same song that the actor in front of the curtain was singing, at the same time. During rehearsals it was not at all uncommon to hear three or more actors singing the same song.

In part this approach comes from necessity. The demands of school and work—and as I stated above, this truly is an extracurricular activity, not even a recognized extracurricular activity as in schools themselves—as well as family obligations often mean that any number of students could miss class or rehearsal on any given day. So students were constantly filling in for one another and learning several parts by jumping in and having other people tell them their lines until they got it. This created a natural corps of understudies. For the students who excel it also gave them an opportunity to learn the play from a number of different character perspectives, so they really did get a better sense of how the story and characters fit together, and cast members could eventually develop the full overview that Koung Peang has.

In addition there seemed to be nothing like auditions as we know it; auditioning came from trying out the part until someone better would come along (which, as when I tried to be the giant, was fairly quick). I was not aware of any competitiveness among the students, but I wonder how that would manifest itself, or how visibly, to an outsider such as myself. I have heard some actors I know be critical of others (of little things: voices, not knowing the lines, etc.), and I also heard or solicited some self-evaluation (both Rina Chan and Ry Khem admitted, for example, particularly enjoying the entrances, exits, and other stage moves, partly because it comes fairly easily to them). I heard some discontent too such as when Channavy for example told me she just "hates" singing the "boring" love songs at the end of the show, her least favorite part). I was fortunate to have these things confided to me, the tip of the iceberg perhaps. But who else heard of these issues, and how much more of the interpretation by the students themselves did we miss altogether?

I am less clear on the issue of how students learned the stagefighting and the movement, how much of that was imitation, how much their own devising, how much following what Koung Peang demonstrated, or how much following what he described. In my case, when I tried to learn the giant's entrance, it was from watching what people were doing, but also there was a language barrier preventing Koung Peang from saying things to me like "Higher!" or "Faster!" I do know that when I posed for a photo in my giant costume and makeup he came up to me and showed me with his eyes how the giant's eyes should go (Does he do this with Cambodian actors or does he speak to them? I never saw him concentrate so directly on making sure someone got the facial expressions right as he did on me). In fact, if one watches him play any of the parts, the acting consists of his eyes, his voice, and his carriage, particularly his upper body. I didn't see any of the students whose eyes took over the way his do, and his use of eyes was all the more remarkable because the opera is a theatre form, where such subtle things as eyes can become lost in a big theatre. So I can't really say *how* he taught the physical action (although he seemed to spend a comparatively large amount of time actually demonstrating the stagefighting, but less time demonstrating the personal body acting). Some students did begin to understand the use of voice, however.

It all seemed less individualistic than student theatre in the U.S. **In fact, the whole art class was geared less toward the progress of the individual student, and more toward the development of both a core group of performers and a group of students who appreciated Cambodian culture.** Mr. Koung's methods of direction were just as systematic, only a different system was involved. One problem was the way in which actors/artists floated in and out of the company. We would be so quick to call it disorganization or lack of dedication, when in fact deeper problems may have lingered, or students were staying home for a variety of then unknown reasons. Sometimes I would ask Leendavy why a particular student hadn't shown up or where they were and she wouldn't know. On a Sunday, one of the last practices before the temple New Year's performance, those who did show up at the temple, including Koung Peang himself, sat around waiting for others to show, and when they finally didn't, after over an

hour, those who were present started the rehearsal. Some of the reasons people stayed home remained unarticulated, for a variety of reasons, especially an unwillingness to confront or criticize elders. Other reasons may have included a lack of dedication and discipline, reflecting on how those values have been shaped by people's experiences away from Cambodia and in Philadelphia.

Ultimately, in the last weeks, when attendance was becoming more essential at each practice—and when the play and the cast were changing to accommodate who was interested in performing—I was given the role (by Leendavy) of calling all the performers and seeing to it that they would come. This happened several times, and when I asked Leendavy about it she told me variously that my words would have greater weight, that the kids respected me (what did being American have to do with that, I wondered), and even that they were closer to me than they were to her. Though this turned attendance into something that related to me, I was under the impression that was a purely logistical decision, when in fact it was more of a substantive, problem-solving decision by Leendavy. When I questioned her about this further, she declined to say more.

**But my role in all this was constantly being redefined (even without my knowledge) and problems were being solved, even though logical reasons came to light later on.** That was the sense that I got from being told to make these phone calls to get people to turn up at rehearsal and from subsequent conversations with students. In fact, talks in informal settings with some students after the end of the term indicated that my role all along had been more interactive and less peripheral than I had at first expected or had realized. This was fine with me and even preferable. But what was surprising was both the degree to which that decision had been Koung Peang's, Leendavy's, and the students', without my knowledge, and the more substantive nature than I realized of the problems, relationships, and issues with which I was involved.

### vii. Evaluation

One question is how the students were evaluated by Koung Peang and Leendavy Koung, and a separate question is what the students thought of the class and their own experiences within it. Yet a third question, which I will also treat in this section, concerns **the cultural nature of the evaluation process in and of itself,** which is highly relevant to a study such as this.

As with any group of students, different people excel in different ways, and learn at different speeds. Darith Moeun, for example, was already a polished performer who had many years' experience since the age of 5 to learn these arts. The other students, mostly new to this, displayed a variety of talents, with different students excelling in dance and movement, comic roles, costume design, and so on. I also did hear Leendavy speak of some students critically, calling some immature, some difficult, yet some of those were the liveliest and most outgoing onstage, turning their class-clownish qualities into

crowd pleasing flourishes. Students no matter how hardworking picked up the material at markedly different paces. One student took to the material quickly, moving and singing extremely well and learning several parts to the point where his family members complained that he walked around the house singing the songs from the opera. Another student, cited for being relatively slow to pick up the technique, was also praised highly by Leendavy and her father for being the most mature, self-disciplined and hard-working. Personality can make up for a lot. The newest student had among the best senses of costume design,[10] while the youngest of the principal cast members, Darith Moeun's 11-year-old younger brother Meth, along with Koung Peang's youngest son, Khom, were two of the most successful comic actors. And so on. Yet some of the most diligent and hard-working students ended up with the smallest roles, while some of the least responsible, because of background or facility, had larger parts. Many of these features, as can be seen, do translate across cultures and educational contexts.

But evaluation itself became one of the most difficult aspects of the residency to translate and assess cross-culturally. **In large part this is because in the U.S. notions of evaluations of teachers and students are framed differently.** Both Koung Peang and the students were reluctant at best to evaluate one another frankly, for a variety of reasons, including:

- their not knowing how information would be used
- an unwillingness to talk about elders in any way that might be deemed disrespectful
- an unwillingness to talk to outsiders about relationships within the community
- their being too close to the class and the performance to get a larger perspective
- the necessity of having a high level of English competence for evaluation, at the very least through translation, and
- questionnaires also presupposing English literacy and comfort with a form which could in actuality present even additional barriers.

Ultimately information was derived from conversations with students, as well as from past observations in the Cambodian community. People resisted all along giving frank assessments of the class, though strongly positive statements (two students on the impact the class had in tying them to their cultural background; Koung Peang remarking on the progress and discipline of particular students) did come through, most often in moments of undirected conversation. What further information I was able to learn came after considerable patience and leaning on the strength of personal relationships built up during the course of the year.

Of course part of the problem is also language. We did not get enough feedback, because the only undirected conversation we could freely monitor was in English, and most such conversation among the students was actually in Khmer. We couldn't even pick up many of the cues, which only a

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[10] A costume which he did sell after the play, for $75 to another cast member. When I explained to Darith that I thought that was too little money and I would have paid more for that, he told me he could teach me how to do that kind of beadwork myself and I could just simply make my own costume.

sophisticated and nuanced understanding of Khmer would allow anyway. If language were not a problem, we could pick up these offhand comments, as we would be able to in English, if we were there. But let's remember that any kind of evaluative comments in hierarchical situations (e.g. comments about teacher, comments about the boss, evaluations of students, etc.) tend to be made in guarded contexts, when all within earshot are trusted allies. There's a limit, even in the best of circumstances, to how trusted one ethnographer can be to both parties.

Plus, we could not assess, without an even more detailed understanding of Khmer culture, how heavily weighted negative comments were in the constellation of overall evaluative statements. Most English-speaking Americans, for example, are aware of some linguistic subcultures that seem to dwell on the negative and never stress the positive, while other such subgroups remain taciturn about positives and negatives. In other words, decisions about what to say or not to say can often be the result of local accepted norms about propriety, politeness, and style. Getting entree into that speech community requires a much more subtle understanding of speech than just knowledge of language.

That said, a few overall evaluations can be discerned.

Leendavy was very satisfied, because of the great strides taken by a cast of newcomers. Koung Peang did say, through translation, that he was looking for appreciation and dedication, as evidenced in students' asking questions and being disciplined about their attendance, and in that sense he had hoped for more. It was hard for him to separate students' performances in the opera from the art class.

It was also unclear how much the class matched the expectations that the instructors held at the beginning. Things changed from week to week, especially as performance deadlines neared and increased and they seemed more comfortable with the changing outcomes than the students. The failure of students to take responsibility for their own transportation proved to be a constant problem, such that weekly attendance was disappointing. On the other hand, performances jelled at a much quicker rate than anyone anticipated, demanding a level of sophistication and development higher than people including Koung Peang himself expected would be necessary. As well, there were barriers to free evaluation between me and the Koungs, because we all felt aware, even if not actually the case, that the possibilities of future funding and future teaching could depend on the success or failure of this Khmer arts class. So there was a strong incentive among all concerned, myself included, to emphasize the best of this class and to downplay the shortcomings.

For Koung Peang American society clearly prevented the class and performance from being more successful, although when he talked about this, his daughter Channavy was reluctant to translate it. He said he blamed America for the lack of commitment in his students. There is "too much freedom" here and all kids want to do is hang out and smoke. Being stupid, in a manner of speaking, was more useful than being smart, because that way students could eventually become smart, without thinking they knew it all. If he taught the class the following year he noted he would start with traditional music first.

But again, we also have to pay attention to the contexts of teaching here as opposed to Cambodia. Here the school had voluntary students who did not necessarily have economic ties to the success of their artistic growth. In Cambodia, when performers were leased to theatres and their economic livelihood depended on their art, the situation of expectation and delivery of services (both ways) would be very different. Bringing what had been a commercial teaching enterprise to a voluntary classroom left us all, in retrospect, somewhat unequipped to think of curriculum in a more typical, American educational context. **Those planning such multicultural ventures in the future would do well to remember if such teaching ordinarily takes place in schools, if it is a commercial, voluntary, or honorific enterprise, and what the usual settings and teacher-student ratios are for such education.**

Students valued the experience of being involved with such a range of arts, and with the opportunity to meet and work with one another. In many cases—despite our own reservations about breadth of recruitment—they had never met before. They also liked the chance to come and do art on a weekly basis, though by the end, the strain of nightly rehearsal took its toll.

A series of informal interviews I conducted at the end of the term yielded interesting assessments of the class, though for reasons of confidentiality, I only provide a few general comments here. Actually, as stated above, getting the students to talk to me at all about the class proved exceedingly difficult, and students who were normally more open with me withdrew when I asked questions about the classes.

Below are some paraphrases from a couple of the students, with direct comments in quotations, and my comments in italics. Each numbered paragraph represents a different student.

1. The class changed me. I learned something new from the Cambodian culture and from the art. "This is my culture!" "I've grown so much this year!" *Why don't people want to talk to me about the class?* They don't want to say anything bad. We don't say bad things about older people, or to older people. We show respect for teachers and older people. "People don't want to say anything bad to you, because they know it's your job." [meaning either people didn't want me to feel bad, or to look bad, or they didn't want Koung Peang to feel or look bad, and they only want to do positive things for Cambodian culture and the community—this from one of the students I knew fairly well]

2. *What did you think of the class?* "Boring, no, say it was fun, it was good, and we learned a lot. I'm scared I'll put [the teacher] down." He teaches culture, but school teaches regular education. He teaches the drawing, the background, the symbols. He doesn't stop in the middle. He gives students advice. If you're an actor you should learn to draw, because that way you learn history.

*What would you do differently if you were teaching?* I would tell students more stories, then start drawing after that. I would tell all the stories first, <u>then</u> draw the characters afterward, to "let them see the

difference between their imagination and the real thing." Nowadays, teenagers and kids want more fun, parties, movies. Opera is too old-fashioned. But if you know the meanings and symbols you can learn a lot. They tell you history if you know what they mean. This is ours, and "nobody can take that dance from us, no one can steal [our culture]." American school is preparing you for work, but this is your background, this is you. "Without the background you won't be here right now. If you don't know anything there is no Cambodia for you." You have to show them you're a Cambodian.

[Koung Peang] tries his best. If you don't appreciate it, it's your fault, you're the one who's stupid. Art class includes history, and dance has to include the meaning. Any art has symbol[ism] in it. You have to think about it when you draw.

3. Teaching was good, but "we have to teach the students more manners." We have to tell students to respect people when they're talking. They mostly do that, but not all the time. Also respect older people.

My favorite was drawing and making faces out of clay. Learned a lot. American school is more strict. [Koung Peang] is strict but he's all right. He gives you time.

"I'm proud of this 'cause I get to show how we are from the start. I'm keeping my culture. I'm remembering it. I'm doing it from the start. It's a good opportunity for me. It feels special because now a lot of people seem to forget about tradition, seem to go the wrong way. It's good we have the opera show to show it."

"We're expressing ourselves, and showing how it is, how hard it is to be living in two different countries." We're "influenced by American—no, mostly Black. We're influenced more by Black than by American."

"We should start over here. Because we messed up over there. I like this country, but I still want to go back to my country. But this is United States. Everyone can come here. It's united, right? Sometimes people say to you why don't you go back to your country? They shouldn't be saying that. I say that to them too—I say why don't you go back, you came here too. The first people who came, they were Asian too, right? The Indians."

"What did the other kids say?"

Some would have hoped for more direct guidance in individual drawings, but some of those same students saw no difference between teaching in American schools and how Koung Peang *should* have taught, while others who saw distinctions between Cambodian and American teaching styles were more accepting of the differences. Some recognized that in America teachers were more open, at least structurally, to criticism, whereas in Cambodia, to criticize a teacher was unheard of.

**viii. Questions of form**

One of the things that has become apparent from this class is that it turned out to be a good deal more difficult to keep the class self-contained and focused on the teaching of one genre, or even one narrow range of genres, than any of us had anticipated. At the outset, I should say I don't know how much of that relates to the nature of Khmer arts or how much is endemic to the nature of performance forms. It turned out not to be limited to "just" painting, or "just" visual arts, or even only arts associated with the *lakhon bassak* as opposed to other dance-drama forms. As stated above, there were a wide range of visual, material, movement, verbal, and musical forms introduced to the students.

This could make us rethink somewhat the nature of how to organize a class like this: Must it be limited to genre? How do Cambodian artists think of the concept of "discipline" as we define it? How are skills honed, in isolation or in relation to various arts? **These arts don't exist in isolation from one another; you can't learn the speeches without learning about the verbal arts and musical forms, you can't learn voice or costume without learning about the character, you can't visualize the mask without knowing the two-dimensional representation of the same character, and so on.**

Yet at the same time there was the need to practice and to do things over and over until the artist was more successful at executing the desired product. So while people went from one form to another, they didn't flit. **It was more part of a calculated, if unspoken, strategy of learning each art form within its proper place in the matrix of arts associated with the opera.**

Just as the forms couldn't be confined, we also found that the class itself couldn't be confined to two hours one day a week, and the structure or existence of the class made it possible to unleash all these different arts, which in turn required a larger structure to practice them. Each genre was like the proverbial potato chip, no one could try just one—but to practice all required more time than the structure of a two-hour afternoon class allowed. Yet the money (and other personal factors too) didn't permit the teachers to develop and execute a full curriculum, in so short a time, covering as many arts as they wished, indeed needed.

**ix. What is teaching, what counts as teaching...**

Visitors to the class always commented on how mimetic the process was, that Koung Peang did not stand at the front of the class and lecture verbally. Class often consisted of his drawing human figures on the board (maybe one or two in a two-hour session), paying careful attention to the decoration on their clothing, their costume, and their physical position. Class was conducted entirely in Khmer (as was most of the kids' verbal wordplay.[11] The students copied what he drew, but sometimes deviated to draw their

[11] They did, however, sign their names using the western alphabet as often as they signed them using the Khmer alphabet.



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own designs, including figures from American cartoons, or combinations of Khmer iconography and stylized American figures.

What is not at all clear is how much preparation the students got in advance (for example, information in the car about what was on the schedule for the day), or how much direction they got once the class started. As Fran Gallun noted, Koung Peang did not go around the room and comment on, let alone correct, students' drawings. Students posted their own drawings on the bulletin board without adult supervision by Mr. Koung or Leendavy.

We can't say how typical the class was for a Cambodian class in the sense of the almost legendary strictness that older immigrants recall. True, it didn't seem that serious disciplinary infractions were tolerated (e.g. the three students who were asked not to return), yet the classes had, to an outsider at least, a very relaxed and comfortable feel, with no one getting talked to, reprimanded, or dressed down in a harsh way. At most, it seemed, there were occasional and vociferous requests for quiet from the group as a whole. Respect for elders was most often the rule. Perhaps because it was a strictly voluntary class the students who were there all wanted to be. If students didn't feel like being in class, they could safely not come without any repercussions (which worked fairly well for the Tuesday afternoon class, but not for the opera performance).

At the same time, because of the many different ages in the same one-room school, the older kids took (or were given) responsibility for teaching the younger students, often their younger brothers and sisters. Thus, kids learned to be teachers as well as students. At first this started out being primarily a disciplinary role, but later on developed into almost a separate class, with certain arts being stressed over others. Usually they concentrated on drawing, stickfighting and movement, while maskmaking, which was a more collective activity, became one in which direct supervision and tutoring became part of the process.

During the last months of the residency, Leendavy and Channavy (with the help, at least organizational, of their mother) taught the youngest girls in the class the basics of two classical dances, *boppha lokay* and *tep monorum*. They performed several times around the Khmer New Year's in April, twice in conjunction with the *lakhon bassak* as a prologue, and twice by themselves at New Year's parties in Camden, N.J. and Lebanon, Pa.

Discipline and education took on a slightly different form around the performances of the opera in April, at the Cambodian New Year's celebrations, and in May. The only time in fact that I recall disciplinary action taking place was the Sunday before the Painted Bride performance, when I was told to call all the cast members to tell them that anyone who missed the Sunday rehearsal would not be allowed to perform. I think the word went out from Koung Peang too, but it was curious that I was told to tell the students this. It had not been my idea, and I do not know who decided this, or whether such situations existed in Cambodia, where the operas would be performed by paid professionals.

At that Sunday rehearsal (to which all but one student showed up at least a half hour late), Koung Peang began with a long talk to the seated assembled members of the cast—the only time I remember witnessing such an address—and though he seemed serious but not angry, nor stern (though this is hard to discern through non-verbal cues) no one seemed willing to translate, and the only thing anyone said to me was when Mean Peach, at 28 the oldest student in the group, and whose English is very limited, came up to me and whispered, "He says you're going to play the giant." Joking with me in this way not only acknowledged my presence, it welcomed me as a member of the group, if symbolically, and satirized the impromptu nature of many of the tasks that all of us were asked to perform, while respectfully pointing to the real hierarchy within the company and nervously laughing in the face of the impending performance deadline. It also was a good-natured way of teasing me—a fairly typical Cambodian form of humor—about being called on to do something at the last minute which I was obviously (and would be nervously) unprepared to do.

**x. ...and what counts as creativity (or, how folk artists get caught in a double-bind)**

*An aside: Without realizing it during the writing process, in this report I have been developing an answer to Howard Gardner, the developmental psychologist who has specialized in issues of arts education and creativity. Reading his work, and developing my own critique of it, after significant drafts of the essay were completed has led me to several insights about our Cambodian arts class, and about some folk arts in education issues in general.*

*In two recent books,* Creating Minds *and* To Open Minds,[12] *Gardner examines the nature of creativity and the development of creative individuals. The earlier book provides cross-cultural material based on Gardner's visits to China; the latter looks at the lives of Picasso, Freud, Stravinsky, Einstein, Gandhi, T. S. Eliot, and Martha Graham in an analysis of the creative life and the milieu of the creative individual. While this is not the place for a full review and discussion of these books, Gardner makes several statements about the nature of teaching and learning art that—if we address them from the perspective of the folk arts—ought to lend some insight not only into this class but into some of the problems facing folk and traditional artists at least in this society. He doesn't claim to be an ethnographer, but his work cries out for a socio-cultural critique, of which this is part.*

*Gardner's conception of creativity requires novelty as one of the most salient components of the work. All seven of the individuals he profiles in* Creating Minds, *chosen from the early part of this century and most connected in some way with Modernist artistic movements, represented among other things a novel break with the past, with the current trends in art in their era. If one's work does not break with the tradition, it is by (his) definition not creative.*

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[12]New York: Basic Books, 1993 and 1989, respectively.

*And yet, to be recognized as creative (for no work is creative in and of itself) it must be recognized by "a relevant portion of one's community or one's culture."*[13] *Ironically, though he rightly observes that the cultural context in which a work of art is received has everything to do with its designation as 'creative,' he does not discuss the limitations, the narrowness of that culture from which he comes and the impact that that fact has on what is considered not to be creative. In other words, on the one hand he notes that creativity is "initially novel but ultimately acceptable in a culture,"*[14] *but then universalizes his own. He does not step back and admit that in this culture, his culture, initial novelty is ultimately acceptable and preferable. Novelty is not a cultural universal. Ordinarily I'd be the first one to defend originality, but it is neither a universal value nor an optimal one. It just happens to be the value of the dominant social and economic culture of our time.*

*To give a specific example, he refers to potential artistic "jurors" or "members of the field" and lists "judges, editors, agents, media professionals, encyclopedia writers"—all educated, all economically privileged—but never acknowledges that many sectors of society have their own experts and jurors, not schooled in the same places, not "professional" in their roles as evaluators. Of course a Picasso, a Stravinsky, an Eliot are going to fare better than a Koung among such a jury! When Gardner has the opportunity to examine a different field of judges, as he does in China, he is critical of their rigidness and the self-imposed constraints of their cultural background, but doesn't see that bourgeois Western European and American culture of the early twentieth century was just as ethnocentric.*

*I bring up Gardner because it seems, from my own experience, that the assumptions he holds about art are very much the ones that a formally educated European-American in the U.S. grows up with too. He seems to say that to be truly creative requires a radical break with tradition, such as even Stravinsky's going to France to compose* Le Sacre du printemps. *Where does that leave folk artists? Is traditional art an oxymoron then? It seems to me that assumption is one of the roots of the double-bind that folk artists get caught up in: if you're traditional, you're not* really *creative and therefore can't compete for the serious money and attention of arts funding agencies, yet if you are novel or innovative, you're not really 'folk' or 'traditional' and thus are ineligible for recognition—academic or financial—as a traditional artist.*

*Gardner also outlines what he calls the 'Exemplary Creator' of the early twentieth century. He reports that the Exemplary Creator emerges as being "prototypically bourgeois"* [15] *without acknowledging what is to folklorists the obvious, that the Exemplary Creator achieves that designation because all the critics, judges, educators, and funders who pass judgment also come from that very "prototypically bourgeois" society.*

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13 *Creating Minds*, p. 36.
14 *To Open Minds*, p. 14.
15 *Creating Minds*, p. 361.

*Who becomes an artist in this country? And who has access to arts education? In part, it is those who can manage "free"* [16] *time and available transportation and find a teacher suited to them. For youth, it depends also upon parental attitudes regarding what is respectable, since artists and performers in Cambodia (and many other places) are often associated with license and disrepute. Most young women still do not have the opportunities that young men do. As stated earlier, the Koung family knows of only one other Cambodian family besides themselves where the daughters have been taught to play all the musical instruments that the sons were. Access—to being an artist and to arts education—is neither neutral nor equally open to all.*

*Koung Peang's wife, Sipom Ming, never claimed to have any particular desire to become an artist, but as a young woman she learned many of the traditional skills and arts that women needed to know for their family occupation: sewing and making clothes, weaving silk, preparing food. When she married a theatrical producer and musician, the kinds of skills she needed to know broadened. Her sewing was put to use to make curtains for the theater and costumes, and she had to learn varieties of beadwork for wedding dress as well as theatrical costume.*

*She was not formally designated one of the teachers when our arts education project began. As folk opera became more a focus of classes, and costume design became more prominent a part of students' work, her significance as a working and teaching artist in the community was inescapable. Again, to look at whether or not she is considered "creative" or an artist, within her community or in larger Philadelphia requires absolutely an understanding of the social and economic background of her work and her life.*

*Gardner also talks about the marginality of the creative individual, and yet the stereotype of traditional art is that it is never marginal. But of course, Cambodian immigrants to the U.S. are both ethnically and economically marginal almost by definition. Moreover, recognizing that no culture is monolithic no matter how "traditional," one does see ways in which folk artists in fact are often marginal in their own communities, particularly as they are viewed—in the reputation of artists as being less than upstanding citizens—as well as in how they view their community, often as outcasts, as critics, as those who seem to feel (or articulate) most profoundly the chains of their culture.*

*Finally, though Gardner admits that if one is too close to a subject one may overlook the obvious,* [17] *he is much more aware of the "rigid standards" of Chinese arts education than he is of American (where, at least in my all-white first-grade class in 1967, we had to draw all people with an orange crayon). He refers to glosses and stereotypes of Eastern and specifically Chinese schools which "seek to cultivate rote, ritualistic, or conventionalized performances"* [18] *and which value "slavish artwork,"*

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[16] The double-meaning here—"unoccupied" and "gratis"—is intentional.
[17] *To Open Minds*, p. 154.
[18] *To Open Minds*, p. viii.

*"prescribed procedure" and "canonical 'right' end-product[s]"* [19] *that are "reliably produced,"* [20] *but again, without acknowledging that his view, our view, of creativity is culturally determined. I would argue that the individualistic emphasis of Western society—whether that comes from the capitalist system or the Judeo-Christian (and specifically Protestant) religious belief system—provides the grounding for a belief in the value of an avant-garde that stresses novelty and rejects not only tradition but community.*

*And if creativity is to be equated with freedom, it must also be pointed out that my observations in this particular class were that students had considerable freedom in certain aspects of the exercises—such as color—even when copying the master's drawings. Their costumes, which drew on traditional patterns and designs, were not limited to those, and featured grand experiments in color, materials, and iconography. Finally, the performance tradition, while memorized (not unlike Western theater anyway, which could also be termed "rote" or "ritualistic"), also featured significant improvisation in both movement and in dialogue. Only, recognizing that required not only a familiarity with the form, but a careful knowledge of the work itself, and of course a knowledge of Khmer. It was months after seeing Koung Peang as the giant in Tipsongva that I learned he improvised numerous comic asides which Khmer-speaking audience members, and his own daughter—laughing as she later watched a videotape of the performance—appreciated fully.*

*Finally, the execution of the masks, the costumes, and so on often required ingenious solutions to the technical problems posed by being half a world away from the traditional materials as well as the sources of traditional designs on which their work was based.*

**xi. Invisible barriers and unanswered questions**

Obviously the language barrier is a great impediment to having a more detailed understanding of this process. It's not that significant interviews or class lectures in Khmer aren't translatable (although they often are not translated), but that so much of classroom interaction is just spontaneous verbal play and what is normally considered not significant, that never gets translated. Couple that with the fact that the primary translator, Leendavy Koung, was assisting in teaching the class, and it makes such scrutiny by an ethnographer more of an activity from the margins.

Also complicating this is the relationship of an outsider to the class (someone, that is, who is an outsider to both the class and the larger community). Though I did know three of the older students before the class, my role, and that of Fran Gallun's, was always liminal; we weren't teachers, weren't authorities, and weren't in whatever role Americans often are. Who were we, and what was the understanding of the students about our roles?

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[19] *To Open Minds*, p. 188.
[20] *To Open Minds*, p. 241.

Speaking for myself, it is now clear that my role was adapted as different groups or individuals needed. As mentioned above, I often played what seemed to be chiefly a logistical role, filling in as coordinator or assistant producer or whatever title needed filling. Yet, such decisions were not strictly logistical but were often made based on the nature of the personal relationships that had developed. When Leendavy commented that the students were "closer" to me than to her, I shrugged, wondering how this could be possible. But I could afford to be completely neutral in the best sense of the term, non-threatening and unconditionally supportive. And the students did respond to that, and continue to do so (suggesting, perhaps, real needs students have). I was also Leendavy's male counterpart, an elder somewhere between the students and Koung Peang, and outside the culture too, potentially being a bridge where I had not recognized myself as such.

Being elders and Americans would to some extent shape the nature of the interactions. How willing would students be to criticize the class? to criticize Koung Peang? In some cases, our liminality had the opposite effect; we were safe to talk to about difficulties in our class, or even for students to talk about their parents, because—and we've noticed this before—we were out of the direct power hierarchy. So we were at once elders and outsiders, but we were also neutral and non-threatening, and could be in a position of being completely encouraging. How would this compare with roles of teachers with whom students interact in school, whether regular teachers or teachers of English-for-speakers-of-other-languages?

Also, we were learning about the art forms at the same time that the students were, Fran Gallun from a more participatory perspective at least regarding the visual arts, while I was learning about them from a more academic perspective, or participatory at least regarding the theatrical arts, though I failed as a giant. At once we could share the ignorance of not knowing about the art or the culture, but had the age and ability to negotiate somewhat within our own culture and within the structure of the team organizing the class.

Questions that remained unanswered would include the following.

- What role does art play in Cambodian American society now?
- What role would it ideally play if there were more opportunities available?
- Thinking about the truly marginal nature of *lakhon* artists in Cambodia, do these students aspire to perform more, or why do they like what they like?
- What are the impediments to ascertaining whether students like an art class even if there is no language/cultural barrier?

As for the question of multiculturalism, what questions does this experience raise about the success of programs that differ not only in their content, but in their entire classroom structure? This was not, it should be clear, Cambodian arts in an American classroom. **The entire context of learning was differently conceived, from venue to subject matter to the relationship between students and their**

**teacher.** The class was predicated on an understanding of how Cambodian students and teachers are supposed to relate (very different from how American students and teachers relate), and on what comprised a good course, creativity, and full curriculum. As Fran Gallun remarked in her fieldnotes, the students did not behave as art students do in an American classroom, nor was there the interaction between Koung Peang and his students that Americans are accustomed to seeing. And the relationship of art class to opera class, from classroom to class at home revealed an entirely different treatment and tradition of art education.

In American classrooms, some of the following questions need to be considered. Do common assignments that we may give students in attempts to be multicultural respond to the needs of students from religious and ethnic minority cultures, or do multicultural programs themselves fall in danger of putting students under greater stress, under scrutiny, further marginalized from their classmates? And, how can we move in the classroom from things that one can't rightly expect of students (or shouldn't), to things that are constructive and possible? And when do we realize that the nature of the classroom relationship is open to change and negotiation, that all teacher-student relationships as currently constructed in this culture do not necessarily represent an ideal, only way?

**xii. The integration question**

Two questions relating to integration seem especially relevant here, one regarding Kong Peang's integration into the Fleisher, and one regarding his integration into the entire Arts Initiative process.

There has long been a debate between integration and separatism as competing strategies when it comes to the promotion and practice of alternative, traditional, and minority cultures. **It is encouraging that in this case, a Khmer arts class, run and structured by Khmers and not conforming to American pedagogical expectations of what is and isn't art or creativity, could successfully take place at the Fleisher.** What may have been lost in that process is the full degree of "crossover" available to non-Cambodian students, but what was gained, significantly, was the right of the Cambodian students to study art without having to take on Western trappings and discard what was their birthright.

Defining that relationship, of a special class within an already existing and established art school, raised issues that neither PFP nor the Fleisher had addressed before. It was a new partnership, requiring new structures of relationship and lots of translation. To some extent the class was micro-managed, but too gingerly—even overprotectively—at the same time. Separation could be beneficial, even desirable, allowing the Khmer class to be run, conceived, and controlled by Khmer artists independently and without Western impositions of "shoulds" (including the Western notion of evaluation as one such "should"); but it could also be stigmatizing, with Cambodian students learning Khmer art, being kept in a separate part of the building, at worst as perennial houseguests but never residents. Many things worked both ways.

We looked for ways to understand Koung Peang's role, tried to use our knowledge of Cambodian and Cambodian American history to understand how the operatic arts would be taught. Sometimes we ran into conflicts between abstract and concrete ways of conceptualizing the educational process, or relied on our markers of achievement and goals (evaluations, questionnaires, a good process) rather than on native markers and native outcomes. Sometimes we tried to ask, but for one reason or another got inconclusive answers. **Sharing a school does not only mean sharing a space, we learned in the course of this class, and during the next two years we hope to learn how to share an understanding of our different processes and outcomes.** It can mean learning to find common languages for things as minor as how to obtain permission to use the water fountain, to things as major as what constitutes a successful teaching and learning experience for 25 students.

**xiii. Is this the beginning of *lakhon bassak* in Philadelphia?**

Maybe. All were surprised, I think it is safe to say, at how difficult the structural barriers would be: finding places to rehearse, finding places to perform, finding money to cover the expenses of cast members (including such "pedestrian" things as paying for the food of all the cast members at a rehearsal, often as many as ten), finding rehearsal times that didn't conflict with school, work, or family obligations, etc. And there were personal issues as well. After ten years of keeping these arts dormant, I think Koung Peang was surprised as how much energy was required to supervise such a large cast and such a variety of arts, logistics, and details. The process of preparing for a performance at once energized him beyond his expectations and almost beyond the point at which he could control himself, and yet wore him out beyond his expectation as well (he had, after all, only been 50 the last time he tried this).

An encouraging outcome was that different participants found skills in themselves they had not known they had. For example, Sockhum Son developed into one of the most adept comic actors in the cast, while Naphal Chhlang took to percussion so quickly that there was even talk of his continuing to study music with Koung Peang after the residency was over. Other students did pursue an informal study of wedding music after the performances and class ended in May. Darith Moeun continued his apprenticeship, and Houng Peach began to learn many of the musical arts associated with the wedding, under the tutelage of Koung Peang. Ry Khem, on the other hand, who had taken so quickly and enthusiastically to acting and movement, had moved to Southern California by the end of 1993. Still, a few students had become so enthusiastic about the opera that they were interested in learning more, and adding new operas to their repertoire.

By the following summer, we were all working on a video version of *Tipsongva*, under the direction of ethnographic filmmaker and videographer Barry Dornfeld, though there was considerable debate over what form that would take, whether it would be a taped stage version, or whether it would be a souped-up high-tech "movie" version without music and with lots of (to Westerners) gratuitous special

effects. The "movie" version would feature dramatic convention of its own—the subject of a separate paper, perhaps—but we could begin to see even in the students' performances the influence not of watching *lakhon bassak* productions in Cambodia and the Thai refugee camps, but the influence of Chinese cinema as seen in the dubbed form in the local Cambodian video stores across the city. Ultimately, time and economics were stubborn enemies. When, after we videotaped three scenes, obtaining funding would obviously require a longer time span than originally hoped, the momentum dropped off. Students moved away, moved on to other things, returned to old priorities (like school and work), and began to forget their lines. Many old obstacles, should this project continue, would have to be surmounted anew.[21]

**xiv. Conclusions: What this is, what this is not**

What value there is in this essay exists probably more in the realm of understanding impediments to successful alternative educational programs, and not necessarily in hypothetical models to follow and how-tos.

That said, let me dwell for a moment on the successes of this program, which were real, tangible, and not insignificant. **We came to this project aware of an acute lack of support for Asian American cultural activities and for programs directed at the education of youth specifically. We rejected the all-too-common folk art fare of selecting an exotic art form and examining it for a day, but instead attempted to turn the Fleisher into a resource reaching out specifically for longterm commitment to a nearby underserved population. How exactly do you move from one-time special events to an intensive process that has a structural impact on art education in the community?**

The class took place weekly, and culminated in performances that served the Cambodian community, drawing hundreds of people to performances in a variety of venues, from the Fleisher, to the Cambodian Buddhist Temple, to the Painted Bride, to Broad Street. Several students who had no prior artistic background, and many more who had no background in forms associated with folk opera, were introduced to these forms and became thoroughly immersed in them. Many were introduced to this aspect of their own cultural background for the first time as well. The bonds and friendships formed among members of the class, as well as the shared interests in art and music, spilled over into further practice, the formation of new dance bands and collaborative ventures in video production, among other things. As someone who has been an educator, I could see growth among a number of the students, and

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[21] Some students were enthusiastic about being in the 1994 Mummers' Parade—and even called me to ask whether we were doing it and what was going on. We started too late to rehearse (many of us for personal reasons), and at the last minute abandoned the project. We vow to return for 1995, though.

several were themselves aware of their own personal, cultural, and artistic development as a result—either direct or ancillary—of this class.

There would be a variety of reasons why this was not an ideal class or an ideal pilot project, by American cultural standards. Two issues in particular, central to the paradigm under which these projects were conceived, raise difficult issues. **First, our American concept of evaluation does not seem to translate well into a Cambodian way of doing things. Our notion of evaluation rests on assumptions of pedagogical fallibility, a relaxation of the hierarchy in teacher-student relationships, the validity of students' self-awareness about their educational experience, and on ideas of what kinds of evidence we consider when evaluating classes, teachers, and students.** That it's acceptable to criticize a teacher, or question a teacher's approach is, if not a new concept in Cambodian education, then certainly an unarticulated one. Yet the students were capable of evaluating the class in Khmer, orally, but not necessarily in English or in writing.

**Second, our emphasis on individual growth and on self-esteem as a measurement of educational development are also culturally specific ideals. Our educational system is goal-oriented, positing a linear time progression for one's life, and the belief in the centrality of the individual. Cambodian cultural values place more emphasis, it would seem from this class, on cyclical time progressions, recognizing the value of the past in the present and of the changing and return of generations and reincarnation of individuals, and a belief in the centrality of the community.** Community esteem, then, is of more value than self-esteem, and the growth of the students depended on their being more Cambodian, not more individualistic. U.S. culture (including education) often emphasizes individualism and specialization. Even though we cannot fail to be impressed by the great strides taken by a number of the class participants (and are happy for the effect the whole experience had on them as persons), we also feel compelled to ask how this class benefited and served the community. Koung Peang's teaching brought together a core group of students who learned to work collectively in a variety of arts. Yet this is not to say that each student did not develop a personal style or certain preferences or facility with certain forms over others. No two artists' renditions of the same drawing, or portrayals of the same character, are ever the same. But that alone was not the goal.

What this was not was a class which successfully integrated Cambodian students into a facility where they now had full access, nor was it one which made Cambodian arts an immediate and fully appreciated component in a multicultural curriculum. It was also not a class which became self-sustaining, without the almost incredible investment of time and energy on the part of the father-daughter teaching/coordinating partnership.[22] It also did not provide enough in the way of inertia to launch us into the following year's class without considerable logistical planning, either. It was a beginning towards those ends, where a beginning had not been attempted before. It was a beginning where parties on all

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[22]Not to mention an ever-expanding staff investment of hours, far outspending the allotted hours under the terms of the grant.

sides took great steps forward toward solving problems that not only had never been solved before, but had never really been addressed. And it was a beginning that, almost more than teaching us about Cambodian culture, taught us to examine what it was in our own assumptions about educational processes that were neither natural nor given, but were highly determined by our own cultural backgrounds and prejudices.

**Acknowledgments**

For their trust, openness, and patience with this often awkward ethnographer, for helping me with their insights into art and education, for their friendship, and for letting me in the Mummers' Parade, I want to thank the following artists, teachers, students, who showed me some new ways to understand art: Leendavy Koung, Koung Peang, Sipom Ming, Channavy Koung, Tha Thach, Houng Peach, Timothy Ngeth, Darith Moeun, Khom Koung, Naphal Chhlang, Rina Chan, Ry Khem, Sockhum Son, Ny Proeun, Peter Lay, Mean Peach, and Meth Moeun. For insights and helpful readings of earlier drafts, I would also like to acknowledge the teamwork of Debora Kodish, Thora Jacobson, and Fran Gallun. We gratefully acknowledge the Pew Charitable Trusts Arts Education Development Project for their funding of this experimental project.

## Appendix

### A. Background on the artists

**Koung Peang** came from a village background in Cambodia where he was born in 1931. As a young man, after briefly serving as a monk, he traveled around the country, studying musical styles and learning ten musical instruments, finally ending up in Phnom Penh. He apprenticed in a local theatre, learning about popular opera, or *lakhon bassak* traditions, but was not one of the formally enrolled students. He learned to draw by copying sketches himself not directly from a teacher but from drawings he saw left behind after classes. *Lakhon bassak* performers were and are expected to know all the aspects of theatre production, including acting, singing, costume design and make-up, and scenic design. By the early 1970s he was producing operas in Phnom Penh and supplemented his income by performing also as a professional musician at weddings and other functions. In refugee camps in Thailand and Philippines, to which he escaped with his wife and seven children, carrying their musical instruments on their backs, he established classes in music and performing folk opera companies.

He since has worked in many disciplines. He is a maskmaker, painter, sculptor, theatrical costume designer, instrument-maker, dancer, *ayaii* (semi-improvisational verbal duelling) singer, and musician. He plays 10 instruments including the *tror sao* (traditional two-stringed violin), *roneat* (xylophone), *takhé* (zither), *khim* (hammered dulcimer), *khloy* (flute), and various forms of drums and cymbals. He is also skilled in telling traditional Khmer folk tales and is also one of the few people currently creating masks used in traditional operas or dance-dramas. He has painted backdrops and curtains used for drama, dances and plays.

Originally from Kompong Thom province in Cambodia, Mr. Koung began his musical and artistic career as a young boy, learning to play the *tror sao* from an older village musician. Since coming to the United States in 1981, he has produced opera, costumed and choreographed folk dance performances, and performed music in various Pennsylvania settings, including the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia annual New Year celebrations, the Folklife Center of International House, the Philadelphia Folklore Project, and in Cambodian community settings, where his musical and artistic skills are in high demand. Mr. Koung received a grant from the Pennsylvania Council of the Arts crafts program in 1988 to teach young people how to make a range of traditional musical instruments. Since 1990, Mr. Koung's *mohori* musical ensemble has been on the roster of the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts On Tour program which features exceptional traditional artists.

**Sipom Ming** originally comes from Kompong Thom province and since she was a child has been interested in making clothes and ceremonial costumes, such as hand-beaded shirts and sashes for weddings and classical dance. She developed her art in Cambodia and in the refugee camp in Thailand, where many of the costumes in this performance were originally made.

Backstage at a performance of the Cambodian folk opera Sipom Ming helps dress many of the young actors. She often stays backstage throughout an entire performance, preparing costume changes, helping with makeup, and making sure props are in their correct position. She also, in her role, can end up taking responsibility for feeding the cast during rehearsals and before performances. Prior to the Mummers' Parade, for example, all the marchers were served a large steaming bowl of pork liver soup over rice. Her work as artist consists of the execution of domestic arts in the service of performing arts.

Following the example of her fine costume work, some of the performers in the cast of the folk opera learned how to bead and design their own costumes, either learning directly from her in her presence, or studying her clothes and beadwork themselves when work schedules may have prevented them from working with her directly.

**Leendavy Koung** is the third youngest daughter of Koung Peang and Sipom Ming. Leendavy first learned how to dance Khmer classical and folk dance in the Thai refugee camp Srakeo-Pi when she was about six years old. She began to learn music from her father the following year, when the family was located in the Khomputt refugee camp, also in Thailand. She was first taught how to play the *skor* (hand drum). She has been a researcher and staff member at the Philadelphia Folklore Project since 1990, and has also worked on a number of special projects at the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition, and Asian Americans United, and was an instructor of Adult Basic Education at Greenwich (NAC) Inc.

**Sipo Kuong** is Koung Peang's oldest son. He has been learning music from his father since about 1968, when he was ten years old and living in Srakeo-Pi, a refugee camp in Thailand. His first instrument was the *skor* (hand drum). He then learned to play the *tror* (two stringed fiddle) and, next, the *khim* (a fourteen-bridged hammered dulcimer). Sipo learned how to performed *lakhon* (Cambodian opera) when he was 20. He teaches *plang samai* (modern band music) to young people. He has about five students, and he has taught them to play this mixture of Cambodian and contemporary music on piano, drum, and various guitars. Sipo himself plays all the musical instruments in his band, including western recorder, saxophone, accordion, and violin, as well as the three traditional Khmer instruments that he learned in his youth. Sipo is now 35 years old, and has lived in Philadelphia for eleven years.

**La Koung** is the second oldest daughter of Koung Peang and Sipom Ming. She plays three traditional Cambodian instruments in the family musical ensemble, the *khim* (hammer dulcimer), *takhé* (zither), and *roneat* (xylophone). She is also a full-time nursing student at Widener University.

**Channavy Koung** is seventeen years old, and the second youngest daughter of Koung Peang. She has been learning music from her father since she was seven years old and after the family had come to Philadelphia. Her first instrument was the *chhing*, and later she learned how to play the *khim*. When she was nine years old, she performed publicly for the first time, in her father's ensemble at the 1985 Cambodian New Year's performance at International House. Channavy has performed *lakhon*, and Khmer classical and folk dance in the community and for Cambodian New Year celebrations since 1987. From her mother Sipom Ming, she is now learning to be a traditional costumer and beautician. Channavy is a junior at Franklin Learning Center.

**Khom Koung** is 14 years old and is the youngest of seven children in the family of Koung Peang and Sipom Ming. He is in the 9th grade at Furness High School, and began studying the opera last year. He has been playing the *khim* in his family's musical group for about seven years.

**Darith Moeun** is 21 years old and recently graduated from Furness High School. He started playing music at the age of 12 at Sra Keo camp in Thailand. He is originally from outside of Battambang, Cambodia and comes from a family of musicians that includes both his parents and his grandfather. His first instrument was the *skor*, and he now also plays the *takhé*. He can sing, and play *mohori* and wedding music. He has been performing with Koung Peang's group for seven years, and writes poetry in his spare time. Under Koung Peang's training, he is now learning the ritual specialist roles for traditional weddings. He is the oldest of five children.

**B. Issues for teaching.**

Following are excerpts from materials prepared for "Representing Folk Culture," PFP's annual workshop for educators on moving past stereotypes and oversimplification in dealing with folk arts in the classroom:

**i. Developing culturally sensitive background information.** Issues: How much/what do we need to know about a culture before we feel (or are) competent to work with students, let alone teach aspects of the culture, in the classroom? How much about Cambodian history and culture is known? is relevant? is dependable? Some things to consider:

Demographic issues - There are approximately 10,000 Cambodians in the greater Philadelphia area. Up to a million people left Cambodia 1979-1992, of whom about 370,000 were eventually repatriated. Most stayed in refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines for 2-6 years before being settled elsewhere. Most of these went to U.S., France, Canada, Australia, and other countries. Up to a million people died 1975-1982 in civil war, Khmer Rouge labor camps, executions, and famine. Refugees began arriving in U.S. in 1980 and continued to 1992.

Cultural issues - Over 95% of Cambodians were Theravada Buddhists in Cambodia, with a small Moslem minority population. The kind of Buddhism practiced by Cambodians is different from that practiced in Vietnam and China. Consequently, the calendar and holidays are different. Cambodian New Year occurs in April, and is related to the harvest. The religion also incorporates indigenous elements, which may also be related to Hinduism, believed alongside aspects of traditional Buddhism. Much of the fortunetelling, magical, and tattooing arts are related to the indigenous religious system.

Some ethnic Cambodians came from the country of Vietnam, and they are known as Khmer Krom; they have a distinct accent and celebrate many of their own holidays and festivals separately from the greater Cambodian community. Other Cambodians in Philly come from ethnic minorities within Cambodia, and speak different dialects of the language, Khmer. Khmer is the largest language in the Mon-Khmer language group, and is not related to Vietnamese, Thai, or Laotian. It has its own alphabet, with 33 consonants, 23 vowels, and 15 independent vowels; no tones. There is also a sacred language, Pali, which is related to Sanskrit.

There are strong historical animosities between Cambodia and Vietnam, owing to the history of invasion and conquering going on between both countries during the past thousand years. Current national boundaries are not reflective of linguistic or cultural boundaries, and are also partly products of French colonialism (which left its own cultural legacy as well). They are also not reflective of boundaries at the height of the Khmer empire, from the years 800-1400, when Khmers controlled much of what is now Vietnam. The current government is the result of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia to overthrow

the Khmer Rouge regime in 1978. The population of Cambodia is now around 6 million, dwarfed by the population of both Vietnam and Thailand by more than 5 to 1.

Stereotyping issues - Like other Asians and Jews, Cambodians often fall victim to the "model minority myth," where the assumptions are that the kids, who are diligent, disciplined, hardworking, and economically well off (or if not, shrewd enough to become well-off within a generation). But, this stereotype, while not true of any minority group, even fails to recognize differences among Asian cultures, let alone differences between individuals within Cambodian culture. Unlike many other Asians, a large portion of refugee Cambodians are from peasant farmer backgrounds, unfamiliar with urban life even in Cambodia, and they came to this country as political refugees, not economic migrants. People may share similar values about education and becoming economically well-off, but may not, placing instead an emphasis on working for immediate, cash income rather than investing in expensive education which may pay off many years down the road. The stereotype also puts people at a disadvantage by glossing over and overlooking some of the problems that people face every day that they can't ignore, let alone overcome because they are not familiar with western culture, the English language, urban life, capitalism, and American culture at all. Students who don't fit the model minority myth are dismissed, without actual consideration of the social, cultural, and historical factors in their lives. And very real issues such as racism are glossed over, because it is assumed they will have very little real impact relative to the strength of their cultural background and values.

Issues of particularity - This all raises questions in developing materials regarding what counts as culture to different individuals and who makes those decisions. The trouble with treating cultural and historical background as monoliths is that very essential differences—such as class, gender, region of origin, family background, individual personal factors—get brushed aside. Who makes the decisions about what culture is legitimate? This can be a highly debatable issue, in cultures where, for example, upper-class experience is privileged over working-class, where male perspectives are privileged over female, or where the experience of the devout, orthodox believer is privileged over the experience of the more apparently secularized. Social stratification, whether in Cambodia or the U.S., plays a large role in the writing and construction of instructional materials. Social stratification also played a large role in shaping Cambodian history during the 1960s and 1970s, during the formation and regime of the Khmer Rouge, and during the reconstruction of Cambodian society both in Cambodia and the U.S. How do we deal with informative materials when they touch on the most sensitive issues as class, gender, race, region, religion, family background?

And how do students develop the self-consciousness to examine these issues both from within and without their cultures, and that of their classmates?

**ii. Focus questions on "Pitfalls in common assignments"**

The following are common assignments that we may give students in attempts to "be" multicultural or to respond to the needs of students from religious and ethnic minority cultures. How can we evaluate the worth and pitfalls of these assignments, separating out what works, from what puts children at stress, under scrutiny, further marginalized from their classmates, in short, what backfires?

A. Telling life stories - having the child come to class and report on the personal and family history that he or she has experienced in both country of origin and the U.S. Does it force a performance? How can teachers respond to the issue that it "cheapens" the experience of immigrant students by turning their often traumatic experiences into either something valuable as a commodity (information exchanged for a grade or for acceptance from the teacher) or something exotic (further isolating and even objectifying the student)?

B. Show and tell about your customs - when a student practices traditions at home that aren't part of white, Christian American culture, students can be asked to display or report on those customs, holidays, etc. in a kind of suggestion of "equal time." Aside from the fact that this gives such students extra responsibility (e.g. having to do a report on the meaning of Passover while Christian kids are not expected to do a report on the meaning of Easter), it also further marks some students as "different" or "other," and has the tendency to stigmatize even despite the teacher's best intentions or stated goal of making the child feel "special."

C. Do your own festival - does this safely compartmentalize culture as entertainment, public display separate from religion and removed from the sacred cycle? While bringing together is the issue, isolating individuals and extracting their bits of culture frames ritual as entertainment without meaning, generalize about the meaning of ritual and tradition for all involved, and depicts it as spectacle not as participation. While it may be meant to add variety to the discussion of culture in the classroom, how can it avoid the problem of trivializing culture by removing it from its meaningful contexts?

D. Looking at difference - how do we get past assignments that lead us down one of two paths, namely that the conclusion becomes either "...and underneath we're all the same" or "we have differences but we're all part of the great American melting pot/patchwork quilt." How do we develop sophisticated means of representing folk culture in ways that broaden the range of understanding of traditional forms, while not overlooking the immediacy of violence, racist incidents and hate crimes that show the basic need for even the first steps in culturally sensitive education? And, if we look at cultures in ways that emphasize their validity and beauty, how do we deal with the less attractive aspects, such as, for example, women's narrowly defined roles in patriarchical cultures? Again, do presentations about culture depict culture as fixed and given, and not as constantly changing, fluid, and subject to multiple interpretations based on shifting perspectives?



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And, how can we move in the classroom from things that one can't rightly expect of students (or shouldn't), to things that are constructive and possible? Is there the danger of pushing them beyond their level of competence?

**C. Additional written materials relating to this residency** are available from the PFP. They include:

1. Tipsongva: A Cambodian Folk Opera. Produced by the Cambodian American Arts Group. Bilingual program notes on a performance at the Painted Bride Art Center, May 6, 1993. 19 pp. $3.00

2. Giants, Kings, and Celestial Angels: Teaching Khmer Arts in Philadelphia. A sampling of works by Peang Koung, Eang Mao, Sipom Ming and Chamroeun Yin. Exhibit notes. 4 pp. $.50

3. Additional teachers' handouts (in process).

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*Uses of Tradition: Arts of Italian Americans in Philadelphia.* By Dorothy Noyes. Foreword by Richard N. Juliani. Describes transformations in Italian American folklife. Illustrated. 80 pp. 1989. $15.00. To order: write Univ. of Penn. Press, PO Box 4836, Hampden Station, Baltimore, MD 21211. (Free with PFP membership).

*Philadelphia Folks and Their Lore.* Educational supplement produced with the Philadelphia Daily News. Articles, games, quizzes, reading lists for kids (ages 5-18), teachers and parents. Illustrated. 16 pp. $3

*Stand By Me: African American Expressive Culture in Philadelphia.* Roland Freeman, Glenn Hinson and Jerrilyn McGregory. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Office of Folklife Programs, 1989. 32 pp. Excerpts of photographs and texts. FREE with membership only.

*Hmong Kwv Txhiaj.* Compiled by Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk and T-Bee Lo with the assistance of Ellen Somekawa. 6 songs (Hmong and English) from 6 singers, with comments. Focus on kwv txhiaj, rhymed improvised songs, sung in response to other songs. A project of the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition and the Hmong United Association of PA.. 1993. 32 pp. Accompanied by 2 audiotapes. $15.

*Preserving Traditions: Continuities and Changes in Philadelphia Folk Arts.* Exhibit catalog, 1990. 16 pp. $2.

*Works in Progress.* Newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project. Published 3x/year. Subscriptions included in membership ($25/year. Members also receive news mailings and other benefits. Call 215-238-0096 for information.) Back issues available for $2 each (1:1-3:2) and for $4 each (3:3-6:3):

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